

SCOPING ANNOUNCEMENT

Environmental Impact Statement on the Habitat Conservation Plan for the Operation of Horseshoe and Bartlett Reservoirs by the Salt River Project

*Due to dry conditions in central Arizona for the past several years, the reservoir levels behind Horseshoe and Bartlett dams have been below normal. As a result, riparian trees and shrubs have grown in the Horseshoe storage space historically used by the Salt River Project to store water for use within the Phoenix metropolitan area for irrigation, municipal, and other purposes. In 2002, a population of southwestern willow flycatchers was found in habitat within the storage space at Horseshoe and along the Verde River below the reservoir. The southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*) was listed as an endangered species on February 27, 1995, and is protected by the Endangered Species Act. Other listed, candidate, rare, or sensitive species also utilize habitat in the area. Operation of Horseshoe and Bartlett may adversely affect the habitat and populations of the southwestern willow flycatcher and other species. SRP will develop and implement a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) to minimize and mitigate effects on covered species and their habitat associated with SRP's filling and continued operation of Horseshoe and Bartlett. This announcement briefly discusses the HCP process, compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, HCP alternatives, issues, and how to get involved.*

The HCP Process

The Salt River Project (SRP) is preparing to apply for a permit pursuant to Section 10(a)(1)(B) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This Section 10 Permit would authorize the incidental take of species protected by the ESA associated with SRP's continued operation of Horseshoe and Bartlett reservoirs consistent with their purpose to store and release water. The application for a Section 10 Permit is expected to include the southwestern willow flycatcher (flycatcher), razorback sucker (*Xyrauchen texanus*), bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), and certain other species in the event they are listed, such as the yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*), collectively "covered species." Prior to and as a condition of applying for a Section 10 Permit, SRP will develop a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP). The HCP will provide measures to minimize and mitigate the effects of the proposed taking of covered species and the habitats upon which they depend.

A decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) regarding SRP's Section 10 Permit application is a federal action that requires compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Compliance with NEPA requires preparation of either an environmental assessment or a more thorough environmental impact statement (EIS). FWS and SRP have determined that an EIS will be prepared.

The EIS Process and Scoping

FWS is the federal agency responsible for NEPA compliance for the HCP. SRP's HCP team will provide information and drafts of the EIS to FWS. However, FWS will be responsible for the final content of the EIS. FWS also will be responsible for preparing a Biological Opinion, which will discuss the effects of the HCP and Section 10 Permit on the covered species, and other species that are listed, candidates, or proposed for listing as federally endangered or threatened that may be affected by the proposed action. The EIS process will be concurrent with preparation of the HCP.

Developing the HCP and EIS is a public process. Identifying potential alternatives to the HCP, as well as significant environmental issues related to the HCP, is called scoping. Scoping for the EIS is one component of the public's involvement in the HCP.

The breadth and thoroughness of FWS' NEPA analysis will depend greatly upon public participation during the scoping process. To the extent possible, public input received during the scoping and draft EIS comment period will be integrated into the development of the HCP and EIS. The EIS will present an analysis of physical, biological, social, and economic effects of the proposed HCP and its reasonable alternatives. FWS will fully consider information developed in the EIS to evaluate the proposed HCP and its alternatives, and to render a decision on whether to issue a Section 10 Permit to SRP.

The Proposed Alternatives

The NEPA process requires a review of alternatives to the proposed action, including a "no action" alternative. FWS and SRP have preliminarily identified the following HCP alternatives for analysis in the EIS.

1. Proposed Action by FWS - Issuance of a Section 10 Permit by FWS authorizing the operation of the full capacity of Horseshoe and Bartlett by SRP, possibly with modified operating goals, along with implementation of the HCP involving measures to minimize and mitigate the incidental take of federally listed species.
2. No Action by FWS - No issuance of a Section 10 Permit by FWS; this would require SRP to do everything within its control to avoid any take of federally listed species associated with its continued operation of Horseshoe and Bartlett.
3. Other Section 10 Alternatives - Issuance of a Section 10 Permit by FWS for the HCP involving the operation of Horseshoe and Bartlett under various combinations of storage capacity and operating goals, along with additional measures to minimize and mitigate the potential take of federally listed species. It is anticipated that the EIS will consider one or two reservoir capacity and operation alternatives that fall in the range between the Proposed Action and the No Action alternative.

Questions and Issues

Questions regarding the proposed HCP and the alternatives thus far identified, which would be considered in the HCP and EIS, include-

- Would the HCP offset the effects authorized by the Section 10 Permit on flycatchers, razorback suckers, bald eagles, cuckoos, or other covered species and their habitat ?
- Would an HCP provide habitat conservation for the continued long-term existence of the listed species in the vicinity of Horseshoe and Bartlett?
- What kinds of activities would be addressed by the HCP and authorized by the Section 10 Permit?
- What would be the geographic extent of the HCP?
- Who would be affected by the HCP?
- Would other species be addressed by the HCP?
- How would the HCP be funded?
- How would the HCP be enforced?
- How much habitat for covered species would be conserved?
- Would habitat conservation involve public and private lands?

- To what extent should resources be adaptively managed under the HCP to accommodate new information and adjustments to conservation strategies?
- What regulatory assurances should be given to SRP with respect to long-term compliance with the Endangered Species Act?
- How would the HCP affect existing water supplies delivered to the Phoenix metropolitan area?
- How would the HCP affect the historical operations of Horseshoe and Bartlett?
- How would the HCP affect recovery plans for the covered species?

The EIS is expected to provide biological descriptions of species and habitats and the effects of the Proposed Action on: vegetation, wetlands, wildlife, threatened or endangered species and species of concern, geology and soils, visual resources, air quality, water resources, flood control, water quality, historic structures, cultural resources and traditional cultural properties, land use, recreation, water use, the local economy, and environmental justice.

How To Get Involved

FWS and SRP welcome your comments on development of alternatives and the issues you believe should be considered in the EIS and encourage your participation in the EIS process. Please submit your written comments at the public scoping meeting or submit your comments by August 15, 2003, using the form on the last page of this announcement, to Mr. Steve Spangle, Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2321 West Royal Palm Road, Suite 103, Phoenix, Arizona 85021; Fax: (602) 242-2513. After the publication and distribution of the Draft EIS, FWS will solicit public comments. A Final EIS will address all substantive public comments.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Salt River Project will hold a public scoping meeting to solicit comments on the scope of the EIS. You are invited to attend this meeting to help identify issues for the EIS. The meeting will be held on July 15, 2003 from 6:00 P.M. to 8:00 P.M. at the offices of the Salt River Project, 1521 Project Drive, Tempe, Arizona. Should you require special accommodations, please contact FWS at the above address or by calling (602) 242-0210.

**ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT ON THE HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN
FOR THE OPERATION OF HORSESHOE AND BARTLETT RESERVOIRS
SCOPING COMMENT SHEET**

Name: _____

Address: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

Representing: _____

You are invited to send comments on additional pages or in a different format if desired.

(Please Be Specific)

Please comment on the issues identified on the previous pages.

Are there other environmental, social, or economic issues that you believe should be addressed?

What alternatives should the agencies consider in the analysis?

Submit all comments by August 15, 2003.

Do you wish to remain on the mailing list to receive additional information on this project as it progresses?

☐ Yes, I want to be on the mailing list. ☐ No, I do not want to be on the mailing list.

Mailing Instructions: *Remove this page from the first page along the perforated line. Please fold with the reverse side out, staple or tape, add a 37¢ stamp, and mail to Mr. Steve Spangle, Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2321 West Royal Palm Road, Suite 103, Phoenix, Arizona 85021; or fax to (602) 242-2513.*

You are invited to send comments on additional pages or in a different format if desired.

If you have received more than one copy of this announcement, please notify the FWS so the duplicate listing in the mailing list can be removed.